

Student Page

New World Exploration Revisited

A WebQuest for Students of World History

Charles J. Elfer - 2013

Last updated (8.29.2013)



"The Meeting of Cortés and Moctezuma."

<http://myloc.gov/Exhibitions/EarlyAmericas/ExplorationsandEncounters/ConquestPaintings/ExhibitObjects/TheMeetingofCort%C3%A9sandMoctezuma.aspx>

Was European Exploration of the New World a Triumph or a Tragedy?

Introduction

Ever since you were in the third grade, you have repeatedly heard about, read about, and on occasion, sung about (probably off-tune!) the exploits of Christopher Columbus and how he heroically "sailed the ocean blue." You may even recall the date of 1492, or, if you are especially savvy, that all of our banks close on October 12th! What we sang about somewhat less often, however, were the circumstances prior to and after the arrival of Columbus and those explorers, such as DeSoto, Pizarro, or Cortés, who came later. Who, for example, were the peoples who inhabited the New World prior to European exploration in the 15th century? Were they savages and barbarians as some Europeans reported? How many songs do you know about the Aztecs, the Maya, or the Inca? What do we really know about early European involvement in the Americas? Were Columbus and his contemporaries heroic explorers paving the way to a *new world* of opportunity? Or, looking back from our vantage in 2013, was European exploration of the New World ultimately a disaster of epic proportions? In other words, was European exploration of the New World a triumph or a tragedy? Perhaps the answers lie somewhere in between. Perhaps the answers depend on our individual perspectives and the sources we use to answer these important questions!

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Task

Using a wide variety of historical materials (e.g., paintings, woodcuts, drawings, maps, letters, cultural artifacts, etc.), you and your team are asked to make a critical determination. Specifically, you must determine, with the support of historical evidence, whether or not European exploration of the New World was a triumph or a tragedy. To accomplish this task, you will need to begin by carefully evaluating and familiarizing yourself with the vast array of materials available in "[Exploring the Early Americas](#)," an on-line exhibition maintained by the Library of Congress. The collection is divided into three parts which represent the Americas before, during, and after European contact. How each team chooses to use these materials may vary widely. After encountering this expedition, teams are welcomed and encouraged to explore the web for additional materials as this initial

research will surely stimulate many new questions and ideas.

Some of the questions your team may want to consider are:

- a. "What was life in the Americas like before European contact and after?"
- b. "To what extent do accounts of New World exploration differ, or reinforce one another?"
- c. "Where do our own stories of New World exploration come from?"
- d. "By what sorts of standards could we evaluate the terms 'triumph' and 'tragedy'?"

After gathering data and analyzing materials with your team, you must develop and present your findings in a creative way to your peers. While the form that products take is ultimately open to you and your research team, you might choose to select one of following paths. Along with your explanation of the sources that you used in making your determination about the central question, any of the products below could potentially work to demonstrate your team's consensus on the nature of European exploration.

- a. Design, and persuasively propose, a new holiday that you believe best commemorates exploration of the New World!
- b. Create and deliver a new song or poem that you believe deserves a place in the social studies classroom for younger students!
- c. Imagine yourselves as journalists reporting on a modern-day trial of Christopher Columbus...for crimes against humanity following his exploration of the New World: Is he a hero or a villain?!
- d. Write an abbreviated and revised textbook description on New World exploration for your peers!

These products represent ideas that your team may choose to adopt, or you may decide to propose an alternative for consideration. In any event, your team should be prepared to present your findings to your peers at the conclusion of the activity. The medium and format of presentations is relatively open. PowerPoint, Prezi, or skits, are all acceptable options, but your team's choice should be made based upon what you believe will best illustrate your evidence-based conclusions and creativity.

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Process

Following our initial discussion of New World exploration in class, you will have 3 full block periods to complete this assignment. A list of steps is provided below for guidance:

Day One:

1. You will be assigned to a team of 4 students.
2. After you find your groups, elect:
 - a. a **scribe** to take detailed notes and to record all of the conversations and ideas that your group will be creating!
 - b. a **materials expert** who will maintain a collection of resources used and their web locations!
 - c. a **lead speaker** who will represent the groups' final product (you may have to share this role, but do elect a lead speaker)!
 - d. a **messenger** who can ask the instructor for clarification, or gather materials from the media center or other school locations.

NOTE: While you each have a role to play, everyone is responsible for research, creativity, and thoughtfulness!

3. Once the roles have been assigned, it's time to get started. Before going on-line, take account of where your group is with regard to the guiding question. Spend a few minutes working to better understand everyone's initial understanding.
4. Get online! As noted above, you need to start with the **Library of Congress** exhibit. It might be a good idea for each group member to explore independently for few minutes first before working through the collection as a group.
5. At this stage, you need to start to develop a direction for your project. What are you finding in the exhibition? What questions do you have? How are your perspectives of triumph and tragedy being supported or challenged? What other resources do you need to find? Can your group reach a consensus? *Step 5 is critical, but you can't spend all day here!*

Day Two:

6. Very important. Try to think about any *evidence* that possibly *contradicts* or *challenges* the consensus that you worked so hard to reach in Step 5. What might you have overlooked?
7. After your team has reached a consensus, you must choose a creative product from the list above, or propose a new one, and begin to develop your product.

Day Three:

8. Complete the product, proofread, and prepare for presentation.
9. Everyone, as in each group member, will draft a 1.5-2.5 page process paper that explains how the team worked through this WebQuest activity. The format should be: Times New Roman, 12 point font, 1 inch margins. Also list the names of your fellow research associates. At the conclusion of the process paper, students should include a list and description of those resources most critical to project development (choose **at least** 3). You might also elect to talk about what you might do differently next time.

START HERE! The Library of Congress, ONLINE EXHIBITION: ***Exploring the Early Americas***

Part One: [Pre-Columbian](#)

Part Two: [Exploration and Encounter](#)

Part Three: [Aftermath](#)

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Evaluation

You will be assessed according to the guidelines outlined in the rubric below. With two exceptions, this is a group grade. **Exception #1:** You will draft your process paper independently. **Exception #2:** Lack of participation may result in downward adjustments if warranted.

Rubric

	Beginning 1	Developing 2	Accomplish 3	Exemplary 4	Score
Topicality: Did your team answer the question? Did you stay on topic?	The product did not address the central question	The product did not completely address the central question or may have only considered one element (triumph or tragedy)	The product addressed the central question by considering both elements of the question (triumph or tragedy)	The product addressed the central question <i>effectively</i> and thoroughly and considered both elements of the question (triumph or tragedy)	
Quality: Did your team produce a creative, clear and well-produced final product?	The product appears to be unfinished or poorly thought out.	The intent of the final product was clear, but clarity or production may be lacking	The final product was clear and well put together. The product was creative, persuasive and engaging	The final product was incredibly clear and well put together. The product was especially creative, persuasive and engaging	
Source Work: Did your team make use of available historical materials and were those materials used effectively to answer the question.	The product did not use historical materials.	An effort was made to use historical materials, but the product did not demonstrate analysis or interpretation	Historical materials used and product demonstrates both analysis and interpretation	Excellent use of historical materials, clear and effective demonstration of analysis and interpretation	
Process Paper: Did you offer a thoughtful reflection on the process of taking part in this project, including alternatives and lessons learned?	You didn't do the process paper.	The process paper was turned in but contained excessive errors, omitted portions of the assignment or was too short.	A good, well-written essay. Generally error free and includes all components.	An excellent, well-written essay. Error free and includes all components. Explanations of source use and future changes were especially well thought-out.	

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Conclusion

Congratulations! Your products were excellent and, with any luck, you've expanded your knowledge of both New World exploration and the challenges of reaching conclusions about the past. So what say you? Where do we go from here? Now that you all have wrestled with this critically important period in history, where do you stand with regard to New World triumphs and tragedies? By what standards should we evaluate historical figures like Christopher Columbus? Would we be better off today if Columbus had never arrived in the Americas? Do you think contact and conflict were inevitable? What do you imagine professional historians might say? And finally, how, if at all, does this experience inform your understanding of global interactions today? Can you provide examples of cultural contact and conflict in the 21st century?

As with any good research, it is likely that you now have more new questions than answers! If you are uncertain, you are on the right track. In fact, uncertainty and new questions are part of the process!

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Credits and References

Designed by **Charles J. Elfer** 2013, (CharlesElfer@clayton.edu) as part of the *WebQuesting at the Library of Congress* professional development course offered through Teaching with Primary Sources at Waynesburg University.

Teacher Notes Page

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Introduction for Teachers

Designed by **Charles J. Elfer** (CharlesElfer@clayton.edu)

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The WebQuest described below potentially serves multiple instructional purposes, as an assessment of a unit or as an ongoing series of web-based lessons, for example. **Users are encouraged to adapt this exercise to their own needs and purposes!**

Was European Exploration of the New World a Triumph or a Tragedy?

About the Learners

As written, this WebQuest is intended for secondary-level World History students, likely high school tenth or eleventh graders. With thoughtful adjustments, middle grades students of world history could surely find use in the exercise as well. I created the WebQuest as a sample for use in Secondary History and Middle Grades Social Studies Methods courses. I **WELCOME** critical feedback from the 6-12 field of practice (see contact information below).

Depending on how an instructor intends to use this quest (i.e., summative or formative), several skills and understandings need to be in place. In the first place, this exercise is not intended as an introduction to source work. It is assumed that students will have thorough understanding of the difference between a primary and secondary source beforehand, and, that they will have engaged in interpretive exercises on at least one prior occasion. Secondly, students do need some degree of understanding of New World exploration prior to beginning this exercise. While the exhibition that students encounter through the Library of Congress does provide some context, some other form of exposure to the general narrative has to be in place. The lesson, as designed, assumes at least one introductory lecture/discussion and perhaps some supplemental reading.

This WebQuest is somewhat challenging in its present form. Of particular note, it is likely that students will have to locate additional resources (e.g., translations for key passages) outside of their initial exposure to the core materials associated with the WebQuest, namely, the ***Exploring the Early Americas*** exhibition. In some settings, it will be critical to locate key supplements (e.g., translations) in advance to ensure that the WebQuest expectations remain manageable. There is no expectation that students will engage in any sort of translation/transcription.

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Academic Standards

General Social Studies Objectives:

- Assist students in understanding the nature of historical inquiry and the role of primary and secondary sources.
- Encourage the consideration of multiple perspectives on events.
- Engage students in speculation about the known and unknown motives and actions of historic figures.

Georgia Performance Standards (World History):

The student will:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the development of societies in Central and South America. (SSWH8)
 - a. Explain the rise and fall of the Olmec, Mayan, Aztec, and Inca empires.
 - b. Compare the culture of the Americas; include government, economy, religion, and the arts of the Mayans, Aztecs, and Incas.
- Analyze the impact of the age of discovery and expansion into the Americas, Africa, and Asia. (SSWH10)
 - a. Explain the roles of explorers and conquistadors; include Zheng He, Vasco da Gama, Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, James Cook, and Samuel de Champlain.
 - b. Define the Columbian Exchange and its global economic and cultural impact.
 - c. Explain the role of improved technology in European exploration; include the astrolabe.

Enduring Understandings:

- a. Conflict and Change: The student will understand that when there is conflict between or within societies, change is the result.

- b. Culture: The student will understand that the culture of a society is the product of the religion, beliefs, customs, traditions, and government of that society.
- c. Beliefs and Ideals: The student will understand that the beliefs and ideals of a society influence the social, political, and economic decisions of that society.
- d. Movement/Migration: The student will understand that the movement or migration of people and ideas affects all societies involved.
- e. Technological Innovation: The student will understand that technological innovations have consequences, both intended and unintended, for a society.

Literacy Standards for the Social Studies (CCGPS 10th-11th Grade):

The student will:

- RH1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information
- RH6: Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts
- RH8: Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims
- RH9: Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources
- WHST1: Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content
- WHST7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation

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Process for Teachers

This WebQuest is not designed for single class period, but rather as an extended project to take place over at least a three day period on a 90-minute block schedule. Presentation of final products and time allocated for the drafting of the final process essays will, of course, require additional time. As designed, the exercise is intended to be conducted in class, with the possible exception of the process paper. The quest is intended specifically for the World History classroom, most likely with a high school-aged group. Students are expected to perform the task in the company of their peers; however, there are not special requirements with regard to grouping. Students could certainly choose their own groups, although the student guidelines assume that the choice has been predetermined by the instructor and based upon classroom context. Given the size of the topic, the nature of the initial collection that students will encounter, and the expectations for student products, a group of four is likely necessary. Reference is made to "team member roles" in the student version and that is intended to organize the initial phases of the task. Those roles are not arbitrary, but can certainly be amended as needed.

Based upon my style, students, and perspective, I like to provide as many options for students as possible. That said, this WebQuest may deserve revision for those classrooms and those teachers who require, or prefer, more structure. To clarify, the student version offers a number of alternative group products (e.g., assuming the role of journalist at an imaginary trial for Columbus, proposing a new holiday, writing a song, etc.). For some classrooms, it might be more manageable to limit those options in order to streamline the process. Another important consideration relevant to this exercise surrounds the online exhibit itself. There are wonderful resources available in the collection, but many of the accounts need to be supplemented by translations. Many

of the documents are quite well known are readily accessible through **Google Books** or the **Gutenberg Project**, but students probably will not know this and may become quickly overwhelmed without some additional help from their instructor in moving outside and into other web resources. Remind students that they do not need to read everything and encourage them to understand that the exercise is part of a much larger process! A good start might be to identify three or four documents and then have the team move out into the web for supplements and context, etc. As with any on-line exercise, consider testing a few sites prior to assigning the WebQuest to ensure that access is possible and within your school's internet security policy.

This WebQuest does not require any unique skills, per se, but there are three important considerations to remember. **One**, this is not a primer to source work, or project-based instruction. Students should be somewhat familiar with historical materials and capable of working with their peers toward a goal. While there are steps included in this exercise, the process is not stepwise and does place quite a bit of responsibility on student groups. **Two**, instructors are advised to spend some time with the exhibition, and web resources beyond the Library of Congress. **Three**, have fun and look forward to being surprised once again by your students!!!

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Resources for Teachers

The materials required for this lesson are minimal outside of a reliable internet connection and student computer access. Most other resources are generally available classroom materials, including:

- Class sets of textbooks for student questions about narrative, etc.
- Other secondary reference materials from school library, or your own library
- E-mail accounts for all students (for at-home questions or resource sharing)
- Video or audio materials for alternative student product proposals
- Materials for the creation of student products (e.g., colored pencils, poster or butcher paper, etc.)
- Overhead system for student presentations

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Evaluation for Teachers

Student products will be evaluated based upon **(1)** their creativeness, **(2)** the workability of each team's argument - based broadly upon the triumph/tragedy prompt, and **(3)** the extent to which products interpret and mobilize historical materials. Together these components should give instructors an opportunity to evaluate both historical understanding and analytical skills. Given the challenge of the assignment, it is perhaps less important that students understand *perfectly* the precise historical context of a given document, but they should demonstrate consideration of such things as perspective, reliability, corroboration, etc.

Whatever form student products ultimately take, each will be supplemented with an individual student essay on process. With this in mind, instructors should be able to evaluate individual learning, as well as potential areas to revisit in subsequent classes. The individual products should also leave room to adjust group-based scores should such an occasion arise.

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Conclusion for Teachers

This WebQuest is unlike a traditional lecture or a test; it is instead a very different form of teaching and learning that highlights creativity and exploration. The exercise asks students to take a stand on an issue that is not entirely settled, but rather subject to some degree of questioning and interpretation. Was European exploration of the New World, beginning with Christopher Columbus, something that we should be celebrating or lamenting? A significant episode in the development of our own, Western way of life was simultaneously the

final chapter in the cultural lifeways of many others. And where exactly does that leave us? Hopefully, by the end of this exercise, a classroom of thoughtful students will find themselves navigating between their own moral understandings and the challenges of balancing those perspectives with their developing appreciation for history and historical thinking. To say it another way, my hope is that students will walk away with an understanding that answers to these questions are neither simplistic nor easier to come by!

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